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The Pope and the Bulgarians: A Reply

PARIS—The author of Tuesday's "Taking Exception" column, Claire Sterling, has devoted considerable time and effort to proving that the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II was masterminded by the Bulgarian Secret Service on behalf of the Kremlin. She has elaborated on this thesis in an article for *The Readers' Digest*, in a book entitled "The Time of the Assassins," and as a consultant for NBC News.

Most recently, on June 10, 1984, Sterling published a 5,900-word account in *The New York Times* describing a secret report by Italian state prosecutor Antonio Albano which asked for the indictment and trial of three former Bulgarian officials in Rome accused of involvement in the conspiracy.

During the course of my own inquiries in Rome into Albano's report, I discovered a series of omissions, factual errors and misquotations in the summary provided by Sterling to *The New York Times*. I refrained from pointing out these mistakes—or even mentioning Sterling by name—as I felt no useful purpose was served by being drawn into a public shouting match at a time when the bulk of the evidence about the case is still protected by Italian laws on judicial secrecy.

This effort to avoid a journalistic argument about a still secret report has now been thwarted by Sterling herself, who accuses me

of "numerous omissions or misstatements" in my article in *The Washington Post* on July 22. I have provided my editors with a point-by-point rebuttal of Sterling's criticisms, none of which I accept, and am happy to do the same for any reader who is interested. I will also make available in due course a list of significant errors and omissions in her *New York Times* account. For reasons of space, I will deal here with just a few of the more significant distortions in her attack on me.

First, I would like to draw attention to a literary device used by Sterling: her tendency to conclude that anybody who questions her thesis that the assassination attempt has already been shown to be a Soviet-bloc conspiracy is accepting "Bulgarian arguments." Fortunately, I am in good company here: In her book (page 197 of the hardback edition), she says that CIA chief William Casey and former national security adviser William Clark were taking a stand that "hardly differed from" the Bulgarian press spokesman's.

By failing to acknowledge that the two articles I have written on this subject have gone to some lengths to give readers an idea of both

sides of the case and have given prominence to prosecutor Albano's contention that his case stands up despite some apparent flaws, Sterling sets up a straw man argument. My articles examined the nature of the evidence without taking a position on whether the prosecutor has proved his case against the accused Bulgarians or not. That is the proper role of a journalist, and it is the role of the Italian courts to decide on the case itself.

The argument that Mehmet Ali Agca, the pope's would-be assassin, could have gotten at least some of the details about his alleged Bulgarian accomplices from the mass media—"the Bulgarian argument." Sterling calls it—does not derive from Sofia. Among the sources for this assertion is Agca himself, who told Italian magistrates on June 28, 1983, that his description of the apartment of Bulgarian airlines clerk Sergei I. Antonov was based on reports in the Italian press to which he had access while in prison.

Agca's contention was described by Albano in his report as "amazing but in fact probable." In her *Times* article, Sterling does not mention this acknowledgment, and indeed omits any specific reference to the June 28 retraction in which Agca denied earlier statements about visiting Antonov's apartment, meeting his wife or knowing that he was employed in the Bulgarian airline office in Rome.

In her column Tuesday, Sterling accuses me of failing to note Albano's comment that the June 28 retraction was "unconvincing and

indeed a contrast with objective evidence." But the report makes clear that, when he uses this phrase, the prosecutor is referring not to the June 28 testimony at all but to a later occasion on which Agca retracted details about a plot to kill Solidarity leader Lech Walesa. (The portion of the report covering this sequence is in fact available for inspection, since it was published by the Italian Catholic weekly *Il Sabato*.)

More to the point is why Sterling, who claims to be in possession of the full text of the prosecutor's report, should have failed to tell her readers of a retraction by Agca that Albano writes in his report—"modifies in a certainly penetrating manner the basic fabric of the evidence . . . and poses new problems to the investigators." Not only does Sterling take a phrase out of context, she also simply ignores statements by the prosecutor which do not support her argument.

Sterling focuses on some details that would not affect the sweep of my articles even if they were incorrect. In fact, they are not. For example, Sterling challenges my statement that Judge Domenico Sica was the first Italian magistrate to interrogate Agca. But he was, and did so less than six hours after the assassination attempt at 11 p.m. on May 13, 1981. Sica told me this himself, and it is confirmed in

a photocopy of the formal interrogation report in my possession.

She is mistaken when she says that all details provided by Agca about Antonov's and Aivazov's apartments have been "subsequently verified." Neither is it true that "practically everything Agca tried to take back had been substantiated already."

Sterling writes that—apart from a claim about carrying arms and explosives—Agca has not taken back "a word" about plotting with the three main Bulgarian suspects and a fourth Bulgarian, Ivan Tomev Dontchev, to kill Walesa. But according to Prosecutor Albano's report, Agca has denied that he even knew Dontchev. He has also denied visiting the scene of the would-be assassination with the Bulgarians.

In pursuing this story I was paying implicit tribute to Sterling for breaking new ground by revealing details of the prosecutor's report before anyone else. It gives me no pleasure to have to respond to her attack by pointing out that this achievement has been tarnished by a lack of concern for accuracy and balance, and an apparent refusal to accept as legitimate conclusions that may differ from her own.

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